"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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THE RURAL CHURCH

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By C. J. Galpin*

Agricultural missions abroad will have a hard row to hoe, we may surmise, so long as America's city people look with apathetic unconcern upon the life, labor, and religious vicissitudes of those who till the soil, unless by some stroke of magic, which I confess I cannot foresee, our press agents can invest the farmer with a dash of the color and sentiment which surround the American Indian, the Eskimo, and the Arab. On the other hand, if the American farmer and the American rural church can take a place in the thought, affection and strategy of Christian America--a place which is justified by their social and religious importance to the nation--agricultural missions, I have no question, will go forward with leaps and bounds.

This is the angle from which I desire to restate the claims of the rural church to a place of honor in American Christendom, and to suggest with modesty, if possible, your part and mine in the things which must be done to restore the rural church to a place of honor.

Lest I should start off on the wrong foot, may I say a further word by way of introduction. I would be the first to propose a toast to the men and women who during the last seventeen years have given their thought almost exclusively to the problems of the rural church in America. I have never encountered a more quietly determined, democratic, tolerant, cooperative, thoughtful group. The years, under guidance of these leaders, have been history-making. I need not recount here their achievements. They are matters of record. When I characterize these exploits up to the present time as critical, analytical, expository, discriminating, intellectual, I accord to them a value which can hardly be overestimated. The intellectual grasp--the comprehensive view of the problem--on the part of these men and women is a fact to reckon with. If there is such a thing as a stage in a problem, the first stage of the rural church problem seems well on its way to completion. With this preface, may I pass on to the basic claims of the rural church to a place of honor.

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Basic Claims of the Rural Church

Broadly speaking, here is the church of thirty-two millions of people living on farms and of twenty millions living in villages--fifty-odd millions of people--more than live in France; more than England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland combined; twice the number in Brazil; more than Italy, Greece, Sweden, Norway all told. These people are not poverty-stricken--not yet. Wealth, especially in land, diffused among them more uniformly than in other types of our population; diffused, yet they do not have much of that rare thing, surplus wealth, upon which the culture and refinements of civilization are customarily built. No one brings any grave charge against this class of our population. Being simply workers in dirty soil, or small shop-keepers, they are forgotten. There are no millionaires among them; no new rich; no great captains of industry; no great bankers; no newspaper men. These farmers feed the nation. They must not get heady, of course, and obstreperous, and attempt to make food expensive. They must be watched at this point. Their ballot is valued. They are to be conciliated, at any cost, in ways that wits can contrive--but outwitted, if necessary, to hold them to their cheap food-growing job. They are possible dangerous competitors with all industries which hire labor to be fed at such low food costs as will not make for labor unrest. They are, you see, on a different level from the American Indian, and the Eskimo, who may be headlined without danger to anybody's business. Well, such as they are, so they are; and human nature as it is, so it must be dealt with.

Attempting to put into words the social role which farm people play in the nation, I shall say little or nothing about the crop-growing function, but rather try to get at what these people, whatever their race or nation, in and of themselves mean to the perpetuation of our cities; what their institutions mean to national life; and what claim, in fine, these folk have to a central place in the policies of the nation and of the church in particular. And at the start-off, I venture to make the positive statement that the American farmer is the mainstay of the American family.

Family is the high point in human society. Family is the tender, delicate, sacred organism of race, in which control over heredity and environment of each person is almost absolute. When the family breaks down, no substitute mends the break.

The 1920 United States census informs us that in the thirty-two millions of farm population, there are 4,000,000 more children--persons under twenty-one years of age--than in thirty-two millions of our city population. In fact, half of the people living on the farms are children. The country, in other words, is the place of children, the habitat of child life. The city, on the other hand, much as we may be unaccustomed to the idea, is the place of adults, the habitat of grownups. Just as there is a timber-line in the mountains beyond which trees do not grow, so it appears that parts of a city are too severe for children, and a child-line is there beyond which child-life tends to disappear.

The city has fewer families per unit of adult population than the country; more childless families; fewer children in families having any children; many more unmarried adults. The basic biologic necessities for child-life are too dear in cities, and tend to become dearer and more dear. Persons who desire children to grace their lives move out of the cities into space, air, sunlight, quiet. This is why the city has no hope of ever again being the place of children, but more and more the place of business and busy adults.

The rural home and family stand today, therefore, before church and nation as the American type. The city family, much as we may deplore the fact, has long ceased to be the type family. The farm home is holding the family idea in the nation, almost at the last ditch, it must be conceded. This is the first basic reason why rural life has national social significance--why the farmer has a role of honor in American Christendom. Let us look at the other basic claim to honor.

It is this: Young farm adults in a steady stream recruit city life and industry. Just because the farm is the place of children, it comes to have more people on it than the farming community can use. Four millions more children than in an equivalent population living in cities means an excess population--an excess that would make a small nation--bigger than Switzerland, bigger than Chile, than Norway, than famous little agricultural Denmark. The farms will manage to feed this excess of persons, clothe them, educate them, when, possessed of the strong right arm, they will turn their backs on the farm and farming, and go to recruit the nerve-fagged industry of cities. The farms feed the city with muscle, intellect, imagination, and possibly conscience and possibly religion. This is the romance of the story, and there is not a word in it of wheat, corn, cotton, cattle or hogs. All the careful studies of this particular situation convincingly show that, up to the present, people from American farms help mightily to weave the fabric of the American city and its institutions as we know them in everyday life. In the decades when the rural church was strong, the streamlets of young people from the rural churches to the city churches were mighty with force and personality. The rugged religious conviction bred on the farms came in to float the city churches to great religious goals of achievement.

The present decade, however, is a far different decade. The rural church has been ground to powder between upper and nether millstones. Youth are growing up and going pagan to cities from farms which in times gone by sent their quota to cities dedicated to God. It is as plain as the nose on a face that, as the farm communities decline into paganism, they sow the wind; and the cities reap the whirlwind. This is the second basic fact why America must place the rural church back in its role of conservator of the headwaters of religion. It is a policy of suicide for the city to pursue a plan of cold apathy in regard to rural people and the rural church. Rather, it behooves the American hierarchies to pay attention--not some little spasmodic and spectacular attention, as they do to the American Indian--but a constant, momentous attention to formal religion in the country. To save the city and to save the city church, they must save the rural community. Now what is our part?

The Rural Church Problem a Symptom

The first stage of the new rural church building has been, I have said, criticism, analysis, intellectual grasp of the problem. The second stage, I believe, is emotion--hope, fervor, passion. Religion, we must admit, is not fired by cold facts. A flame is required. The church rises to a prophet, seldom to a logician. One must "go mad," apparently, with the Apostle Paul's type of mad zeal, to be heard. I propose, therefore, the second stage, a stage of prophetic fire, a stage of passion.

Recall with me, for a moment, two or three of the passions of history, and you will see my drive: "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?" "Play the man, Master Ridley, we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust shall never be put out;" and Latimer bathed

his hands in the flames--"I know only Christ and Him Crucified."

The facts of the first era of thinking on the rural church will furnish the fuel for the flame of the second era. We pray for a rural prophet. And after all, I have no doubt that the problem of the rural church is but a symptom of the present-day general state of religion. The Reformation was a house-cleaning of dry rot in the magnificent structure of the church; graft, unchastity, open sin winked at, crimes compounded by higher-ups. Surely the church is not like that now. Surely a second Reformation is not in the wind. Aye, but suppose the church is sick. Suppose it is sick, after all. Suppose it is very sick, but with a different kind of sickness. Surely the Protestant Church in America is not well, when the rural flock among fifty millions of our people is broken up and broken down into so many unshepherded huddles and the wolf, too, biting at every flank--all because our Protestant sectaries will not pool their prayers and consolidate their power. Waste. The luxury of individual superiorities. High virtue preening its superior formulas of one sort or another--preening its superior historic authenticities. Stubborn hierarchies, sitting tight in the comfort of superior virtue and good conscience, unwilling to lift a little finger to save from pollution the sources of population and of religion. Comforts of a defensive virtue and a good conscience held by virtuous officials--boards, committees, secretaries, superintendents, presidents, bishops, clergy, lay delegates. Not vice, not graft, not crime, not the whited sepulchre--but sin--sin just the same--the refined sin of inflated superiority, holding righteously aloof from joint battle against the devil.

If the American farmer slowly sinks into peasantry, through national unconcern; if the rural church sinks and goes down with him; it will be due, in my estimation, to the sickness of the American church; it will be a case of national decline due to the temporary eclipse of religion. It will not be at base a case of bad economics or bad politics. The aristocratic superiorities of a dozen righteous cults--all so near alike that God Himself is not supposed to tell them apart--will have brought on the doom.

Conclusion

Religion is the only lantern I know in this twilight world. It may be sometimes a smoky lantern. It may be hidden under the jacket of some very ordinary person. I shall not live to see the new day for the rural church; but that day will come. I do not believe the American farmer will sink into peasantry. I believe a prophet will arise, who--warming all hearts and bringing to the point of ignition the dormant love of men for men, for just plain men--will build upon the facts of this generation and upon the insight of this intellectual era--and the rural church will rise to distinction. I do not expect to see with my own eyes your sects and mine--all very haughty cults, indeed--joining their resources under a single battle-cry against the devil; but I do not doubt for a single instant that it will one day come.

This address was delivered by Dr. Galpin at the annual meeting of the International Association of Agricultural Missions in New York City on December 3, 1925. We offer no apologies for printing without a single change this prophetic article written thirteen years ago and still pertinent to the rural church situation today. — J.H.R.

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